Why the attacks on JFK film?

Belinda Taylor

It was a gloomy November day in New York, those many years ago, and I was taking a blessedly long nap while my baby daughter slept. When she woke in the late afternoon, I turned on the radio, looking for music to accompany dinner preparations. Instead, I found only somber talk on all the stations. Something was going on. I'll never forget the shocking words that finally revealed the terrible truth of what had happened:

"Lyndon Johnson was administered the oath of office aboard Air Force One with Mrs. Kennedy at his side, her stockings still stained with the slain president's blood."

Fast-forward 28 years to a sunny January afternoon in California. The same daughter and I sit in a darkened theater in Davis to watch Oliver Stone's controversial film, "JFK" and share again the shattering experiences of that day in Dallas when President Kennedy was assassinated.

For me, the film was a reminder of events that remain remarkably vivid and a refresher course on the myriad conspiracy theories that surfaced afterward. For my daughter, it was a first-time immersion in the assassination. Am I concerned that Stone's elaborately woven theory of a high level coup d'etat will shape her ideas about this tragic event?

Not at all. Stone may or may not have gotten it right, but his version of the truth is no more implausible than the Warren Commission Report that concluded Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

A shroud of doubt has twined around the assassination for nearly three decades. It's time it was unwrapped, no matter how unpleasant or troubling the consequences. Thanks to Stone, it may be.

Because so many Americans believe there is more to the Kennedy assassination than has been told, I am astonished at the way Stone is being vilified in the media for using this event and the unanswered questions surrounding it to create a riveting film.

Like others, I have long believed there was a conspiracy of some sort, either in the killing or the subsequent handling of the facts. Or both. I'm glad my daughter and son and other young people are getting a glimmer of the anguish and suspicion surrounding this watershed moment in American life.

Certainly it is a worthy topic for artistic examination. As an artist, Oliver Stone has taken one of the most seminal events of our lifetime to tell a dramatic story of betrayal and regicide. These are old and respected dramatic themes, found in the Bible, in "Hamlet" and in "King Lear."

"JFK" is artful, compelling and downright boffo filmmaking. It has done exactly what good art should do: it has provoked. The film may not be giving us truth with a capital "T", but it has whetted our appetite for the truth. Thanks to this film, there are now high-level calls for the release of files that have gathered dust under lock and key for 28 years.

But why the fuss by the critics and columnists, the attacks on Stone by self-proclaimed keepers off the Truth? Is it simply that Stone has championed a theory that has been discredited and made a hero of a gadfly, maverick New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison.

The establishment tsk-tsks. Apparently conspiracy theories were something we were supposed to leave behind as we reached middle age, along with tie-dye shirts and Jimi Hendrix albums.

The dust-up over "JFK" reminds me of another film I saw this past weekend, a German movie called "The Nasty Girl." It's a movie based upon a real woman who, as a student, decided to look at how the Nazi era affected her small German town. She read yellowing newspaper articles, interviewed aging villagers and poked into old files that, like Kennedy assassination documents, were supposed to be kept secret for many decades.

She, too, was vilified in the press when she obtained secret files that showed current, respectable leaders in the community had denounced Jews and collaborated with the Nazis.

Ultimately, she was honored for her work and a bust was made of her to be placed prominently in town. But by then, she was so paranoid and horrified by the truth, that she rejected the honor.

I think ultimately Stone, too, will be honored for asking the uncomfortable questions. I just hope we can get some of the answers in my lifetime.

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